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RUEHBR/AMEMBASSY BRASILIA PRIORITY 0371
RUEHBW/AMEMBASSY BUENOS AIRES PRIORITY 0993
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RUEHPE/AMEMBASSY LIMA PRIORITY 5627
RUEHME/AMEMBASSY MEXICO PRIORITY 1233
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SANTIAGO 000665

SIPDIS

STATE FOR PM/RSAT BURNETT
DOD FOR CHRISTI HUNT

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SUBJECT: CHILEAN DEFENSE MINISTER ON SOUTH AMERICAN DEFENSE COUNCIL, BOLIVIA

Classified By: Political/Economic Counselor Juan Alsace for reason 1.4(b).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY. During a July 10 meeting with the Ambassador, Defense Minister Jose Goni explained that the proposed South American Defense Council will not/not be a military alliance and instead will promote defense coordination, exchanges, and transparency. Chile's recently signed defense agreement with Bolivia, while largely symbolic, is significant as Chile's first bilateral defense agreement and is emblematic of efforts to use excellent military-to-military ties to improve the strained bilateral diplomatic relationship. Goni opined that the Bolivian military was tired of getting involved in political disputes and, while not supportive of President Evo Morales personally, was unlikely to intervene in domestic politics.
END SUMMARY.

South American Defense Council to Promote Transparency and Cooperation

¶2. (SBU) The proposed South American Defense Council (CDS) will not/not be a military alliance and instead will create a mechanism for defense coordination, personnel exchanges, discussion, and expressing common opinions where they exist, Chilean Defense Minister Jose Goni told the Ambassador July 10. Currently, there is no mechanism for South American Ministers of Defense to meet regularly--existing fora are either global or focus on service chiefs. CDS aims to fill this void and promote transparency and mutual trust among participants, Goni said.

¶3. (C) A working "Group of Experts," informally chaired by Chile, is developing a proposal to create CDS. All UNASUR members participated in the first working group meeting (mostly at the undersecretary level), which was held two weeks ago in Santiago and included representatives of both foreign affairs and defense ministries. Goni said he had expected a contentious first meeting and was pleasantly surprised that there was a great deal of consensus on most issues. Venezuela, which took an ideological stance and wanted to make the CDS a military alliance, was out of step with the general agreement among other country representatives, but did not stand in the way of broader agreement. There was some discussion of expanding the group

beyond UNASUR. Brazil rejected Goni's proposal for the possible inclusion of Mexico, while Chile and other members pushed back against the inclusion of Cuba, citing likely U.S. opposition. As a result, the group decided against any near-term expansion plans. The Group of Experts will meet again on July 23 or 24, again under Chilean auspices.

¶14. (C) Goni noted that Chile had moved further than most of its neighbors on strengthening civilian control over the military, and that one byproduct of the CDS process could be a strengthening of civilian defense planning in other South American countries. He also noted that Chile pushed back against Brazil's desire to use this forum to press for intraregional defense procurement in South America.

Chile's Defense Agreement with Bolivia

¶15. (SBU) According to Goni, Chile's recently signed defense agreement with Bolivia, while very general, was a very significant development because it is Chile's first bilateral defense agreement and because Chile and Bolivia do not have full diplomatic relations. Goni described military-to-military relations between the two countries as "spectacular" and indicated they could serve as a starting point for improving broader Chilean-Bolivian relations. The agreement is part of an effort by the two countries to build cooperation and trust in small but significant ways, including visiting monuments honoring each others' fallen soldiers, participating in each others' military festivities, and conducting educational exchanges.

Goni's Bolivia: A Non-Interventionist Military and Growing Bolivian-Venezuelan Ties

¶16. (C) Evo Morales, and Bolivia's relationship with Chile, have changed substantially in the last two years, Goni asserted. In contrast to earlier hardline positions on gas supplies and other issues, Bolivia has become much more interested in cooperating with Chile since Bachelet was elected. While acknowledging Bolivia has a problematic relationship with most of its neighbors, Goni nevertheless asserted that the Bolivian president is "very rational in general."

¶17. (C) Despite the complex and delicate issues facing Morales, most notably attempts by several regions to gain autonomy, Goni predicted no major changes in Bolivia. While the Bolivian military doesn't support Morales' policies, Goni believes the military is tired of being used politically. The highest levels of the Bolivian armed forces are united in their commitment to supporting the constitution and the integrity of the Bolivian state in the face of secessionist efforts.

¶18. (C) However, Goni noted Venezuela's growing influence in Bolivia. Venezuela has given Bolivia two helicopters, which although officially to be used for transport, Goni believes are actually intended to protect Morales and potentially evacuate him from the country in the event of political unrest. In addition, Venezuelan troops are training Bolivian forces stationed near the border with Paraguay, and Venezuela is providing millions of dollars in funding for infrastructure along Bolivia's borders. Bolivian NGOs and cities are developing civil partnerships with Venezuelan groups. Goni believes that while some Bolivian leaders may feel ideological kinship with Chavez, Morales and most Bolivian leaders see the relationship in pragmatic terms--a way to gain much needed financial support. Nonetheless, in the event of a crisis, Morales would likely turn to Chavez for assistance because he has few other choices.

Domestic Defense Issues

¶19. (SBU) Reiterating themes from Goni's visit to Washington in April and the Defense Consultative Commission held in

June, Goni described greater educational opportunities for the Chilean defense community and better environmental practices as his highest priorities for the US-Chilean military-to-military relationship. Efforts to reform the Ministry of Defense are on-going, but without an educated cadre of civilians, there will be no one to fill new positions in the reformed structure. The executive branch would like Congress to give it broad authority to restructure the Ministry, whereas some in Congress would prefer to vote on a specific restructuring plan.

¶10. (SBU) The Ambassador encouraged the Defense Minister to tender a proposal for the sale of military helicopters, noting the many advantages of US-made Blackhawks. Goni responded he was impressed by the Blackhawks' capabilities and noted they had been used recently to rescue plane crash victims in southern Chile and hostages in Colombia.

Comment

¶11. (C) In an expansive mood, Goni's perspectives on the South American Defense Community (CDS) and Bolivia track with the Chilean government's pragmatic attitude toward foreign relations. Chile wants to use the CDS to subtly help strengthen civilian control of the military in neighboring countries. Similarly, whereas other countries might see full diplomatic relations as a prerequisite to a defense agreement, Chile continues to improve its political relations with Bolivia by employing military cooperation.

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